

LESSONS FROM PLAYING CARDS

By SAMUEL ZOVELLO

As an international student of the history of playing cards, the author has developed some highly interesting theories on the connection between playing cards and calendars. A monograph by him, published this year under the title "History and Origin of Playing Cards," discusses this subject in considerable detail. Under the stage name of "Zovello," the author has appeared in many theatres in an act featuring the magic of cards.

PLAYING CARDS, as we know them today, are probably a direct development of little one-week Egyptian card-calendars, which originally were combined into a pack of 52, to make a complete calendar for one year. The 53d card, now the joker, was originally provided to take care of the odd 365th day of the year: it was a card of good fortune.

The student of calendar reform might well go back into early Egyptian history and trace the origin of playing cards, for he may draw certain definite lessons regarding calendar reform from the story which they tell.

Knowledge of the calendar, among the ancient Egyptians, was the possession of the priesthood, carefully guarded as a religious secret by a sect of priests who were called "keepers of the days." They were the only ones who knew when to anticipate the rise of the River Nile, on which the life of Egypt depended. They alone knew when to give warning to the populace so that it could take to the hills for safety.

These priests kept the untutored masses ignorant of the calendar and thus fostered the belief that the priesthood possessed supernatural powers of divining the future. This belief was cultivated to such an extent that the masses believed the priests of Isis and Osiris could even foresee the personal future of an individual.

The calendars on which the priests relied for their predictions were, in the early days, engraved on huge stone slabs kept carefully guarded in the inner sanctuaries of the temples. With the invention of papyrus as a medium for transcription, the cumbersome and unwieldy stone tablets were superseded by rolls of papyrus, which permitted reproduction of the calendar on a smaller and more convenient record.

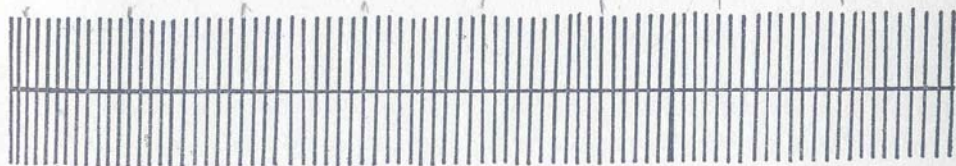
But the new calendars were almost too portable. They were easily lost or stolen, and in case of loss or theft, precautions had to be taken to prevent the new possessor from using their secret information. So the papyrus rolls were divided into sections which could easily be fitted together when the priests wished to consult them. Separation of the papyrus into weeks was the logical outcome. The calendar became a package of 52 equal strips or cards, with one extra piece for the 365th day. This extra card was made similar in size to all the others, to render the pack uniform.

Fortune-telling from cards is thus shown to be one of the most ancient developments of the use of this material. The secret of the priesthood eventually came into the hands of unscrupulous charlatans, who used the calendar cards to predict not only the appearance of a certain day or date as the time most suitable for planting, harvesting or fishing, but also any other private or public event and ultimately of course the personal fortune of any individual. The charlatans who used cards for this purpose wandered over the world during the ensuing centuries and became known as "gypsies," this word being of course a corruption of "Egyptians."

But now to get down to the history of the Egyptian calendar, and its lessons for present-day reformers. The most significant fact is this: that the Egypt of pre-history had a 13-month calendar, which it eventually rejected on the basis of increasing knowledge, replacing it with the 12-month division which is the basis and foundation of our present-day calendar. In other words, any current proposals for a 13-month year are a backward kind of reform, suggesting the restoration of a system which the scientific knowledge of Egypt displaced as awkward and unsuitable.

In the early dawn of civilization, wandering nomadic tribes were attracted to the Nile valley because of the richness of its soil and the ease of cultivation. The only drawback to this paradise was the periodic flooding of the land which constituted a grave menace to its inhabitants. In due time, however, these ancient peoples learned that the floods could be predicted, and that the climate of the Nile valley expressed itself in three seasons: first, the inundation, or period in which the fast-rising river flooded the land; second, the sowing and planting season, in which the waters subsided; third, the harvest or dry season.

Survival in that region necessitated development of a system for anticipating these changes. Observant members of the priesthood learned to foretell climatic changes by the migratory flights of birds, by the breeding habits of beasts and fish, by the positions of the sun and stars. Eventually some early scientific genius discovered that the days and nights between each constantly recurring period could be counted. The priests became counters of days, and 365 days and nights constituted a cycle, or year.



The first attempt at making a calendar must necessarily have been something like the above diagram—365 lines divided at the center, with each half-line representing a day or a night.

As time went on, this crude calendar developed by observation of the

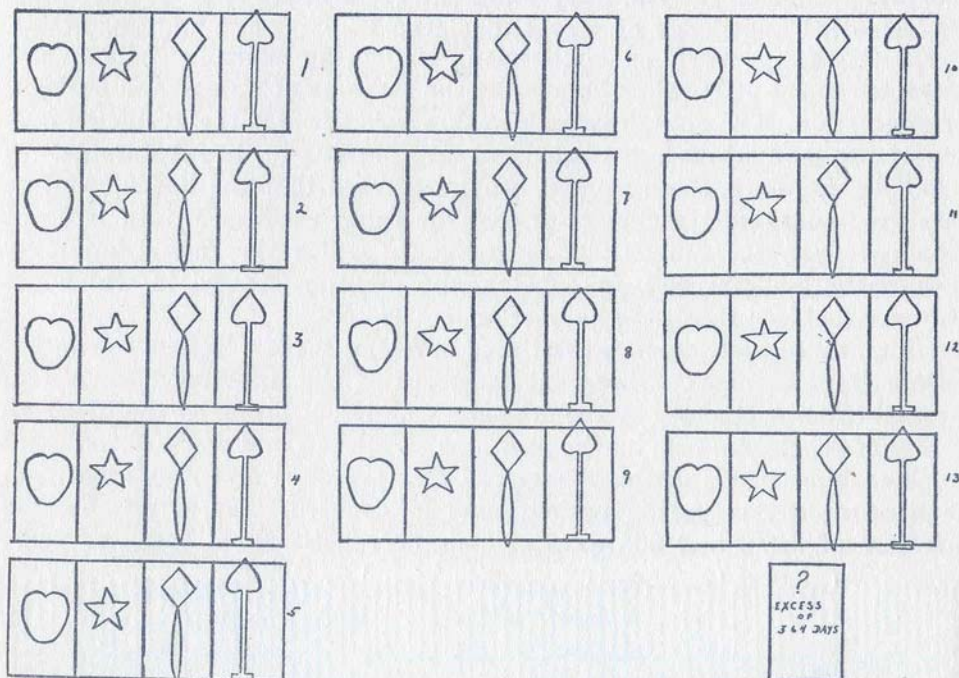
phases of the moon. From a very early period the Egyptians possessed knowledge of a 13-lunar-month year. Each month was made to consist of exactly 28 days. The 13 lunar months thus totalled 364 days, with an odd day left over.

By further observation, each month was in turn divided into four equal parts of seven days each. The calendar probably resembled the following:



Primitive Egyptian calendar: Thirteen months of 28 days each, with an extra or intercalary day at the end of the year.

Within the months it appears that each week was designated by a certain sign or symbol. The first week of the month was indicated by a cup, the second by a pentacle or five-pointed star, the third by a sword or spear-



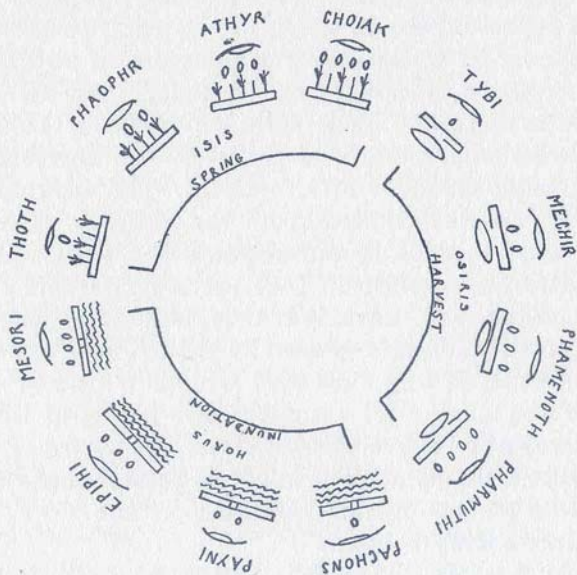
Early hieroglyphic symbols for the weeks, as grouped into months.

head, the fourth by a spade. The origin of these emblems is associated with the Egyptian belief that the universe was composed of four elements—water, earth, air and fire. The first week of every month pertained to water, the second to earth, the third to air, the fourth to fire. These ele-

ments were portrayed symbolically: the cup for water, the star for earth because the heavenly bodies were supposed to direct and control all earthly activities, the spearhead for air, and finally for fire the small shovel used for handling fuel in homes and temples. The symbolic calendar of the 13 months was essentially as shown on the previous page.

The abandonment of the 13-month calendar appears to have been simultaneous with the necessity of remedying the error which had developed from the fact that the Egyptians had hitherto used a year of 365 days, whereas the actual solar year contained $365\frac{1}{4}$ days. Every four years a complete day was lost, and over a period of a few centuries the dates of spring had been pushed into those of harvest. To King Aseth goes the distinction of having legislated this reform, installing a three-season year with four months to each season, or 12 months in all, with an occasional adjustment by the priest-astronomers to allow for what we now know as the quadrennial leap-year day.

In the hieroglyphic writings the crescent is used to indicate the moons which formerly figured in the division of the year. Ellipses beneath the



Egyptian solar calendar of 12 months and 3 seasons

crescents showed whether the indicated month was the first, second, third or fourth of the season. Wavy lines represented the season of flood, flowers spoke for spring, and the sign of harvest was a large house or granary.

Besides the hieroglyphic signs, each of the months bore a name derived from some outstanding Egyptian personality, whether mythical or factual.

Names such as Thoth, Phoaphr and Athyr originated in a manner similar to that by which we moderns have named March from Mars, June from Juno, and July from Julius Caesar. The Egyptian seasons paid tribute to Osiris, Isis and Horus, their son.

When the figures of Osiris, Isis and Horus were drawn on the papyrus card-calendars, all their attributes were included, as well as the marks and symbols which served to indicate their power and position.

In the evolution of these card-calendars into our modern playing cards, the figures, marks and symbols have been frequently altered. The first historic record of playing cards dates back to about the year 900, in India. They were introduced into Spain and Italy from Greece in the 14th century, and to this date the Spanish name for cards is "naipes," derived from the city of Nauplion, Greece. However, it was a Frenchman, Jacques Gringoner, who developed the modern playing card, using it as a means of entertaining the French king, Charles VI, during his fits of insanity. Gringoner went back to Egypt for his models and largely retained the original Egyptian calendar symbols. Our present-day pack of playing cards is an almost exact duplicate of the ancient Egyptian calendar.

The 52 cards represent the 52 weeks of the year; the 53d card or joker is the excess day over 52 weeks. Adding the value of all the cards or pips—that is, ace-1, deuce-2, jack-11, queen-12, and king-13, gives 364; the joker brings the total to 365. The suits composed of 13 cards each are derived from the 13 lunar months, rejected by the Egyptians for a more scientific and divisible calendar of 12 months. The alternating black and red colors of the cards originated from the papyrus calendar-segments, which were colored in order to differentiate the weekly sections of the calendar. The two-way design on face cards represents day and night.

The symbols on the cards have, it is true, undergone some change. The Egyptian five-pointed star was replaced by the French fleur-de-lis, now the club. But examination of any club card will show that it really is still a pentacle, each of the small circles and the two points of the base make it actually the equivalent of a five-pointed star. The sword or spearhead has been simplified into a diamond. The spade is retained, and the cup is now a heart, owing to a curious misinterpretation of the old French word for chalice, *chorur*, into *coeur*, or heart.

Among the court cards, the jack is Horus, who still in clubs and diamonds holds a rod, with which in Egyptian mythology he was supposed to measure the rising of the Nile; in spades he holds an hour glass, for he was the god of time in old Egypt; in hearts he holds a leaf, which was originally a lotus, a flower which blossomed immediately after the subsidence of the Nile waters. The Queen of the playing cards is Isis, goddess of Spring. The King is Osiris, god of the harvest, and his four cards represent the four glorious months of his section of the calendar.